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ABSTRACT

Privatism, vouchers, too many pressure groups, and a deemphasis of citizenship present the worst stumbling blocks to education. A five-point curriculum model includes: (1) the symbolics of information--the skills of language and computation: (2) the key concepts of a selected set of the physical sciences and mathematics: (3) developmental studies in three substrands (development of the cosmos, development of institutions, and development of culture): (4) problem solving of current societal import: and (5) exemplars--a selected set of class works that are worth studying in great detail. The adoption of such a curriculum design would contribute to the needs of all constituencies. (SAS)

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Public Elementary and Secondary Education in the '80s

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The major fact confronting public schooling in the coming decade is the further fragmentation of the public into many small publics. Trying to adapt to a multiplicity of constituencies that share no unified goal, set of values, or a common vision of the good life, may be more than the present system can survive.

Two lines of inquiry should be pursued in testing this hypothesis. One is into evidence of the fragmentation. I would study the fragmentation caused by the mandates of state and federal legislative bodies enacted in the last decade, especially since the Civil Rights legislation of the mid-sixties (special education, compensatory education, bilingual education, mainstreaming). Further, we should learn more about the single-issue constituencies that have proliferated in the last decade and their diverse demands on the schools. One might investigate profitably the effects of the diversity of demands on the costs of getting children ready to learn as distinguished from the costs of actual instruction. Also worthy of a systematic investigation are the changes in the employment tracks for school personnel as a result of efforts of the schools to respond to mandated curricula, modes of teaching, testing, etc.

The other line of inquiry should be directed toward the ability of the public school to cope with uncontrolled diversity. Especially important are the time lags, i.e., the time it takes to change a curriculum, a set of text materials, or the consciousness of teachers whose mental furniture has already been arranged in fairly fixed patterns. The strategy of teacher training will have to be re-examined, if the attempt to meet the diversity with diversity is to be taken seriously and implemented in school practice.

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My own pessimism with respect to the ability of the schools to respond successfully to the fragmentation is based on the following more or less related considerations:

1. The growth of privatism and voucherism. These moves reflect many motives, some not altogether admirable. But they show that an alternative to public schooling is being considered seriously by an increasing portion of the most influential portion of the population. When these groups complain about the inadequacy of the public schools, they mean in effect that their particular complex of expectations, values, and ideology are not receiving sufficient attention. For some it is basics, for some it is open schooling, for some it is freedom from conventional value schemes, for many it is standard preparation for admission to a "good" college.

2. The attempt to force public schools to respond to the demands of every constituency strong enough to exert political pressure leads to more and more specific training of teachers with a heavy emphasis on apprenticeship. This has been called competency-based teacher training, which is best accomodated by practice on tasks divided into small segments and defined in publicly observable activities. If this trend continues, there is a real possibility that the teaching staff will consist of narrowly trained para-professionals working under the supervision of shop forepersons. This development will reverse a fifty-year trend to more professionalized teacher education. What the response of teacher organizations to such developments will be is hard to foretell, but it may be welcomed by those elements in the community that do not wish to utilize the public schools for their children and by those whose primary goal is the reduction of taxes.

3. Of even greater danger to the public schools is the abandonment of its mission as a preparation for democratic citizenship. Whether it was the Thomas Jefferson, Horace Mann, or John Dewey, it held that a democratic society

demanded an enlightened citizenry, presumably all the citizens. Enlightenment meant knowledge and rational action based on it. Only universal--and in time, compulsory--schooling would accomplish this. The requirements of adequacy in citizenship were thought to meld with adequacy for vocation and personal development. Something like the American Creed celebrated by Gunnar Myrdal in An American Dilemma, despite the debunking efforts of the revisionist historians of education, did provide an ideological cement that unified and rationalized a wide variety of efforts to accomodate the school to wave after wave of immigration, a major depression, and several wars. Much of this Creed may have been ignored in practice, but it was not mere rhetoric. Nothing on the horizon promises to take its place, so that instead of cultural pluralism being variations on a theme enriching society, it is now a congery of variations perhaps not even in search of a theme--that can impoverish society.

If I were to look for a unifying principle it would not be in a political creed or ideology. It would be a return to a subject-matter general education curriculum K-12. It would contain the following strands. There would be diversity within the strands to accomodate individual differences in learning readiness, but the design would be the same for all:

Strand 1: The symbolics of information--the skills of language and computation.

Strand 2: The key concepts of a selected set of the physical sciences and mathematics.

Strand 3: Developmental studies in three substrands: The development of the cosmos; the development of institutions, the development of the culture (arts and sciences).

Strand 4: Problem solving of current societal import.

Strand 5: Exemplars--a selected set of class works that are worth studying in great detail.

The adoption of such a curriculum design would provide what a school and a school alone can contribute to the common needs of all constituencies, albeit not to their idiosyncratic interests. Special interests could be pursued as extra-curricular activities or in private schools. Vocational training should be provided in great variety by post-secondary schools. If there is uniformity in Grades K-12, we can have fruitful variety in subsequent grades. The return to a lean subject-matter curriculum of general education would give an intelligible and defensible meaning to public schooling for the public good. Moreover, it would take seriously the rhetoric of equal opportunity; namely, an equal chance for <u>all</u> children to study the disciplines that provide the form and substance for an educated mind. Schemes that purport to provide equal opportunity by unequal programs are not equal.

If this remedy seems simplistic, it is intended to be so-- an alternative to complex schemes that are no solution to anything.